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A YELLOW COSTUME THAT CREATES COMMUNITY

DOCUMENTATION GILET JAUNES, STRUGGLE

The movement of yellow vests seems to confirm a break of the historical thread of class struggles.

If we stubbornly insist on sharing articles on the "gilets jaunes" of france, it is because they embody a number of characteristics that may mark out the future of possible anti-capitalist movements. The following reflection, published with *lundimatin* 172 (31/12/2018) points in that direction.

We publish here an analysis from Temps Critiques (27/12/2018) about the yellow vests movement and all that it puts into question regarding the historical categories of a certain left.

The movement of the yellow vests seems to confirm a break in the historical thread of class struggles. It had already been initiated world-wide by the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement and the movements of the Squares, all of which had been at the head of mobilizations of demands concerning liberties, equality, living conditions in general; employment more than working conditions. It is also for this reason that these movements were addressed much more to the State than to employers, insofar as the process of globalization/totalisation of capital leads States to manage the reproduction of social relations at the territorial level, while remaining dependent on the requirements of globalization.

In France, the resilience of the traditional workers' movement still maintained the idea of the class struggle against capital. In the spring of 2016, the fight against the reform of the labor law and labour statutes continued along the path of "the working class above all", without however obtaining tangible results. A few years earlier, the renewed mobilisation generated by the "movement of the squares" did not allow for an effective reaction or resistance, because it quickly privileged the formalism of the assemblies, to the detriment of the substance of struggle. This struggle seemed to have found a more promising blend within the Spanish movement, with the overflow of the squares towards neighborhood solidarities in connection with housing problems.

In all of these struggles, including in the case of the struggle against the labor law, the question of the general strike or the blocking of factory production was not raised, nor has it been posed by the yellow vests movement. In these conditions, to bring together the pursuit of roundabout occupations with calls for a workers' strike is a fiction of "conflict convergence" or the outdated idea that blocking flows of goods would be secondary to blocking the production of the goods themselves.

A community of struggle that is no longer a community of labour

The roundabout rebels certainly include many salaried employees (or similarly, employees who benefit from subsidized jobs or social assistance to return to work), but there are also other non-salaried occupants or former employees (including poor self-entrepreneurs and especially retirees who are far from all going off on low cost flights to exotic destinations). It is not from the working relationship that they intervene, but from their living conditions and their social non-existence. A struggle, of course, but a classless struggle rather than a class struggle. It is therefore useless to look for what would be its proletarian wing, to animate its expansion, something that it clearly does not wish to develop.

Moreover, if the yellow vests are scorned by the power in place, it is not because they are "proletarians" in the historical sense of the term (Macron does not openly scorn the professional workers raised in the rules of the the art of labour unionism and legal education), but rather because they are, for him, nothing ("people who are nothing", he said), modern sub-proletarians, social cases, savages having forgotten all the rules of civility, people who can neither speak nor produce officials or leaders. "No teeth", as François Holland said once. A contempt itself despicable as it is charged with inhumanity; a blind contempt since it casts an undifferentiated judgment on the movement, while even we, as we mingle with them, know that there are very many different people within the yellow vest collectives.

According to the testimonies of the collective life of the yellow vests in the "cabins" which have flourished on the roundabouts, we can affirm that it is first and foremost a community of struggle made of sharing, in difficult living conditions; a union of energies against globalist power (Macron, ministers, the elected, the corrupt, the great-tax evaders, the confiscators of the word of the people, etc.); collective aspirations to put an end to a bad life; all this with sometimes utopian accents, as sung by a yellow vest amateur musician "I do not want to live in a world where doves do not fly any more".[1] A lyricism and songs far removed from the eternal political couplets on "emancipation" that accompany the demonstrations of workers or leftists. It is this community of struggle that makes people take turns to prepare food on the spot or share the food that is brought in support. Solidarity is not an empty word.

What is the organisation?

If we agree that yellow vests have developed an autonomous movement, we will not go so far as to say that they self-organise themselves in the ideological sense of self-organisation, as conceived by historical councilists or libertarians. It is an immediate self-organisation that leads to nothing but his own immediate practice. It reaches its limits when it wants to move to the stage of a true organisation of the movement, if only in the decision-making to refuse or not the requests of official authorisation for demonstrations or to accept or not established routes, the election of spokespersons or delegates. There is a refusal of organisation and not self-organisation, and it corresponds not only to distrust of any political or trade union organisation, but also to the fact that the present conditions have exhausted all the known historical forms.[2] Indeed, the yellow vests can not create "roundabout councils", as there were formerly workers' councils or soldiers' councils. But that does not mean that they can not argue or act from these roundabouts. Simply, they are not places that can ensure the durability of political forms, as we have seen recently with their dismantling. Here again the movement innovates, because it at the same time blocks and moves. Nodes of blockades can indeed be moved and renewed in the same way that places and protest routes can be redefined at any time.

The risk the is that of a repetition of previous actions. However, this repetition is already made precarious 1) by the decreasing number of those present at the points of mobilization; 2) by the intervention of the gendarmes at the roundabouts and especially against the kinds of small ZADs which have more or less spontaneously formed there; 3) by the new apparatuses mobilised by the police during the Saturday demonstrations, which tend to transfer the real violence of the repression of State, which alienates a large part of public opinion, onto a violence intrinsic to the movement, given the fact of its refusal to comply with government calls to stop demonstrating. It is the movement that then becomes the troublemaker and all those who call for it are thus guilty of the same offense, by intention, a form of crime increasingly manufactured in the name of urgency or exception (for example, in relation to terrorist activity), but recyclable for the occasion.[3]

From negation to institutionalisation?

Did we move to a second phase, more affirmative, that of the RIC [*référéndum d'initiative citoyenne/citizens' initiative referendum*: a demand to promote proposals of law originating with the citizenry, along the lines of what is found in Switzerland], while the first was more negative (Macron, resign!, We will not give up on anything, etc.)? Or can the movement continue by absorbing this new electoral proposal, something that seems to offer a way out for those who, among the yellow vests, see that Macron will not resign?

If the RIC destroys the immediate dynamics of the movement, it is because on its current basis, that of the roundabout occupations and demonstrations on Saturday, it does not carry a clear historical dynamic, especially as the practice of assemblies, as well as the idea of delegation, find little echo or create divisions within the movement. It is precisely because it is incapable of making its dynamics historical on an assembly basis, that it can take refuge in the RIC. A referendum is for some an example of direct democracy, but for us it is the risk of a beginning of the institutionalisation of the movement [4] – or worse the birth of a typical Five Star movement, as in Italy.

Our criticism of the RIC can not therefore be taken primarily on the basis of a perceived strategic error of the movement that would thereby be “co-opted”[5], as claimed by a leaflet published on the net. Indeed, this leaflet retains the traditional leftist discourse on “co-option”, but finally rests on positions of “disengagement” limited to an anti-macronism. It is tempting for some to appropriate them because they may seem uncompromising and have expressed the unity of the movement during the first weeks, but for those who, like us, think that capital is a social relationship, we can be satisfied with neither. Of course there are reasons to argue that the adoption of the RIC would ultimately only concern “societal issues”; questions that are at the source of all the media or populist manipulations, and which do not relate to the material and social conditions which are at the source of the revolt. Moreover, how could a referendum force employers to raise wages and owners to lower rents?

But then it will be retorted, “what do you propose?”. This is the same as what we were told in 68 and this time, in addition, without even the escape, for some, of responding by proposing exotic models (Cuba or China).

One can not neglect the fact that what makes the strength of the movement is also what makes it weak. To take just one example, the actual link between the yellow vests and trade unionists intervening on the roundabouts remains very formal, insofar as these trade unionists only intervene as individuals, as we do, but without establishing a mediation that makes possible and concrete the fact that more and more basic trade unionists are ready to enter the movement, but on another basis that is not the convergence of struggles (this is the point of view of the CGT), but with the feeling that it is the same struggle and that in addition it took forms that make it possible to “win”.[6]

Yet it is a sentiment shared by many participants in the inter-professional union event of December 14th, who also participated in one or more Saturday demonstrations with yellow vests. Moreover, more and more *cégetistes*, even if globally they are a very small minority, put on yellow vests, while bearing signs and CGT stickers, or better, wear red and yellow vests. But subjective expectations are limited by objective conditions, because the union world is increasingly cut off from what we can no longer even call the world of work, so much have situations become particularized. A composite ensemble that, on the one hand, understands that “working more to earn more” is an illusion, but on the other, does not seem to oppose the tax exemption of overtime proposed by the government. However, the latter has recognised negative effects on the level of employment, which is a concern of the yellow vests. This contradiction may explain the fact that the movement does not seem to make any reference to the notion of guaranteed income, even though it has the consciousness and the experience that, often, working is no longer enough to live [7].

The movement expresses, by its diversity and heterogeneity, the multidimensional nature of inequalities and a very different “sense” of the statistical inequalities, taken one by one. This gap is also due to the fact that France is more efficient in redistributing income upstream (accessibility to university, health, minimum wage, quality of life in general), that seems “normal”, than downstream, where the direct progressive tax weighs little; the CSG is for all, along with the VAT and various other taxes which weigh particularly on the propensity of the poorest salaried employees to consume.[8]

Towards a general of all roundabouts?

A consumption that the movement upsets during this holiday season by blocking the supply of large supermarkets at central platforms, such as that of Auchan near Nîmes, or directly blocking the entrance of supermarkets. Some prophets of doom, always running ahead of triumphant capital, may have spread rumours about the yellow vests, that they are hurting the economy by blocking large supermarkets, thereby benefiting Amazon and other online sales services. However, this assertion is highly questionable since the first figures show a general decline in consumption in traditional shopping places and a slight increase, but normal, because expected on the basis of an average increase, of online sales. Yet it is not unthinkable to consider the idea that “the spirit of the time” (gassed) is not conducive to consumption and not just because it would be more difficult to supply. In the same vein, we saw statements such as, “Unplug the TV and put on your vest.” Many yellow vests indicate that they no longer leave their homes except for what is essential. The lack of social relations is palpable and the invisibility we are discussing here is not that of exclusion, but that of a general social invisibility due to the new geopolitics of space which also concerns the inhabitants of suburbs [9]. This situation imposes itself on a much broader ensemble of people than that which is covered by the struggle between the two great classes, the bourgeois and the working class, nor is it reducible to a simplistic opposition between the rich and the poor defined quantitatively or monetarily.

It is the classless struggle of a “multitude” understood in the sense that it is not that of the kind, exploited 99% against the 1% of malicious exploiters and profiteers, at a time when the hierarchies of social positions or at work are both multiplied and refined, and are produced and reproduced without too much qualms by individuals, at each level they occupy. A classless struggle in the sense of the absence of a historical subject.

The movement of yellow vests is often criticised because, unlike historical workers’ struggles, it would not present a project of emancipation. It is a fact, but we have already said elsewhere why these projects were carried, from 1788 and 1789 until the years 1967-1978, by precisely historical subjects (first the bourgeois class and then the proletariat). The defeat of this last revolutionary cycle ruined any project of emancipation, except that which capital itself realized as part of the completion of the process of individualization in a capitalised society. But at the roundabouts and other places of expression of the current movement, anyway, there is a tension towards the community, not an abstract tension towards the human community, but a tension at the same time

concrete (it is at the level of affect) and general because the movement embraces and questions all social relations. It is no longer the "All together" of 1995 against a specific project, but a sort of inseparable overturning and questioning of the capitalist totality, from viewpoints or angles in themselves partial.

This partiality of the attacks is for the moment compensated by the totality of the "act against", the one that is translated in the language of "We will not give anything up" of the yellow vests, which answers to the "you are nothing" of Power. This "We will not let go" implies determined collective actions that the excessive presence and aggressiveness of the police can make violent; a confrontation of forces that the power and the media call "extreme", with all the interested orchestration they give them.

Notes

[1] – <https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/economie-social/un-gilet-jaune-de-montbard-makes-a-carton-on-the-web-with-sa-new-chanson-1545108297>

[2] – On this point, cf. the blog of Temps critiques about the days of Eymoutiers: <http://blog.tempscritiques.net/archives/2179>

[3] – After Julien Coupat, it is now the figure of the yellow vest movement that is paying the price. We are witnessing a criminalisation of social movements with the proliferation of arrests, preventive custody and heavy prison sentences for the slightest trifle. So many anti-constitutional measures, because of their blatant disproportion with the incriminated acts which demonstrates not the strength of the state, but its weakness. A weakness made even more visible by the fact that, on the other side of the barricade, the police, in a half day strike, obtained a from 120 to 150 euros of monthly salary increase.

[4] – At the same time, we notice that for the first time, official requests for authorised protest routes have been filed with certain police prefectures, as was the case on 22 December 2018; the first noticeable retreat of the movement, with the concomitant creation of marshal services specific to the yellow vests.

[5] – Available here <http://www.19h17.info/2018/12/12/non-a-la-ricuperation/>

[6] – While the CGT signed with six other trade union centrals the condemnation of the methods of struggle of the yellow vests.

[7] – And paradoxically, it is Macron who makes the ghost resurface, with the increase of a tax on work activity, which thereby loses its original character, which was to push back to work people satisfied with the social minimum. But this is something else that is the recognition that wages no longer pay work "correctly" and that the complement must be drawn from public money. The "work more to earn more" exhausted its effects, even if the tax exemption of overtime seeks to give it a breath of life ... at the expense of unemployment figures!

[8] – See the investigation by Th. Piketty and the Laboratory on Global Inequalities.

[9] – Indeed, if the "problems" of the suburbs are highlighted by sensationalism on the side of the media or political interest by the parties, the daily life of the majority of its inhabitants, all associative or cultural actions that take place, are rendered invisible.h

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